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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002262

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2017

TAGS: PGOV KDEM VE

SUBJECT: FINAL "NO" CAMPAIGN RALLY YIELDS HIGH TURNOUT

REF: CARACAS 002259

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The "No" block successfully mustered a significant public show of support in its November 29 Caracas rally. As many as 100,000 voters attended the final "No" rally before the December 2 constitutional referendum, one of the opposition's biggest crowds in recent history.

University students played a prominent speaking role urging Venezuelan voters to vote "No" and challenging the government to promote political reconciliation. Opposition parties were also widely represented at the event. Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski exhorted the National Electoral Council (CNE) to run a transparent election. The CNE took issue with the "No" campaign rally's stage, and government officials reportedly prevented live broadcasts from CNN, Colombian, and Spanish broadcasters. The "No" camp's closing rally gave the opposition a timely boost, but it still needs to mobilize all its remaining resources to deliver voters and election monitors to the polls on December 2. End Summary.

"No" Vote Closes on a High Note

¶12. (C) The final rally for the November 29 "No" campaign drew possibly as many as 100,000 people, surpassing the pro-RCTV marches of last May and possibly even the mega-march that closed Manuel Rosales' 2006 presidential campaign. Still, one of the march organizers who had initially predicted a turnout of 200,000 told us the turn out was less than hoped. Unlike in previous marches, all of the parties advocating "No" (Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), Primero Justicia (PJ), Copei, Movimiento a Socialismo (MAS), as well as former abstentionist Accion Democratica (AD) and Comando Nacional de Resistencia (CNR)) participated in the march. Students from the major universities also participated and played prominent speaking roles in the rally.

¶13. (C) Poloffs observing from one of the four gathering points saw a sizable portion of students, PJ members and MAS members well represented. Most marchers wore either shirts with themes urging people to vote "No," or decals with similar themes attached to personal clothing. Poloffs saw groups of Metropolitan Police throughout the area casually observing the events and the BRV flew helicopters above the crowd. The mood of the participants was relaxed and there were very few reported incidents of physical violence. The massive crowd at one point chanted "We are not afraid!" ("No

tenemos miedo").

¶4. (SBU) Various opposition party and student leaders spoke to rally the crowd, send public messages to the government, and convince undecided voters to participate. Several leaders focused on the fact that they met their goal of filling Bolivar Avenue "without using buses." (Note: Poloffs viewed some privately contracted buses from their limited vantage point). Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski told the National Electoral Council (CNE) that the opposition would respect the results of a transparent election. He warned that "this time we know we are the majority" so if the CNE played any tricks, the opposition would "defend the vote on the streets. We are not armed, but we're not insignificant!" Student leader Yon Goicochea spoke at length about the need to promote political reconciliation in Venezuela. He also urged Venezuelans to remember the violence that occurs weekly and the extensive corruption before making their decisions.

Government Tries to Interfere

¶5. (C) Press contacts reported throughout the day that the BRV stymied international media attempts to cover the event live. One Spanish correspondent claimed he was even presented with a document stating that CNN, and Colombian and Spanish broadcasters were prohibited from transmitting live video footage. CNE President Tibisay Lucena reportedly ordered the dismantling of part of the stage, claiming that some posters violated campaign regulations prohibiting the use of the national colors and historic figures. She threatened the opposition and Globovision that she would request suspension in media coverage if the opposition failed to remove the images. March organizers removed a large portrait of Venezuelan founder Simon Bolivar from the stage

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backdrop, but left up the "No" flanked by the Venezuelan national colors. Miranda Governor Diosdado Cabello did his own news report live on state television station VTV looking out from a building allegedly on Bolivar Avenue and showed selective images of scant crowds to try to prove that the opposition had not drawn as many supporters as it claimed.

Comment

¶6. (C) Local pollsters tell us the opposition needs to generate a high voter turnout -- 70 percent or more -- to have any chance at defeating the referendum. This march gave the "No" vote a boost going into the December 2 referendum, but the cash-strapped, underorganized opposition will still have to mobilize all of its resources to ensure that these supporters show up at the polls. President Chavez will address the "Yes" camp's mass rally in the same downtown avenue November 30 to close its campaign. Chavez supporters have ample resources and experience in generating huge rallies, but this time they are under additional pressure to show that Chavismo still has much more "street power" than the revitalized opposition.

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